

An estimated 62% of eligible Iraqis went to the polls on Sunday and cast their votes in parliamentary elections. Importantly, turnout was high among all of Iraq's ethnic and religious backgrounds, indicating that each segment of the population believed the election process was fair and legitimate. It is also significant to note that sporadic acts of insurgent violence did not deter them from exercising their fundamental right to vote.

As a parliamentary system, Iraq's next prime minister will be selected by the party that won a majority of seats or is successful in building a majority coalition by uniting with other parties. Although election results are not yet finalized, it appears that either the current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki or former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi will be Iraq's next leader. As noted by the New York Times, both of these leaders "campaign[ed] as secular, nonsectarian leaders promising to unite all Iraqis." Their apparent success indicates that most Iraqis want a united country where ethnic and religious differences do not divide or generate strife but instead are transcended by a common desire for peace and stability.

Iraq's democracy is promising but still in its early stages. It is critical that its current and future leaders remain committed to democratic ideals, such as the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion, and the rule of law. It is also crucial that Iraqi leaders firmly reject ongoing efforts by the Iranian regime to turn Iraq into a radical Shiite government. Based on the latest milestone election, I remain upbeat that the Iraqi people are determined to build a strong, stable, and united nation. While difficult days remain, continued progress toward that end would allow our remaining troops to return home by the end of next year as planned, and significantly bolster U.S. security in the Middle East by further strengthening our alliance with Iraq and by encouraging and enhancing the pro-democratic movements in theocratic Iran and other non-democratic countries.